



PLUMMER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Driven by Education

ARTICLE BY HEATHER SCHOELL
PHOTOS BY MEAGHAN GAY



Plummer Elementary School, the campus at 4601 Texas Ave. SE, is on an upswing. Performance is up, and their hard work is duly noted by the chancellor. Plummer DC Public School (DCPS) offers Head Start through fifth grade under the direction of Principal Christopher Gray.

Working Hard, Working Smart

Christopher Gray has been Plummer Elementary's principal for four years, and all signs point to success in changing Plummer's culture from one of poor performance to kids who know they are capable of performing. What has changed? "Standards," said Gray. "Spending time in the classrooms, constantly working with students, putting a greater emphasis on education. I know it sounds strange, but there really wasn't much of a focus on education before I got here."

One thing that Gray focuses on is behavior. "We're bringing direction and order to the school, creating an environment that is conducive to learning," he explained. About 90 percent of Plummer's 219 students are in-bounds for the school, and many of them come from the nearby projects. There is a multitude of socio-economic hurdles for Plummer families, but every child is expected to succeed. "Our teachers have high expectations for the students," said Gray. "We view obstacles to education as opportunities to create success stories. One thing that was challenging was getting kids to believe they could do well on the DC CAS (Comprehensive Assessment System)."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

1. Art teacher Mr. Montgomery asks students to identify genres.
2. Khanika Armstrong and Angel Mabry read about Ms. Frizzle in library.
3. Mr. Gray looks on as first-graders read about Johnny Appleseed. Photo by Plummer Elementary School.
4. Pernel Brown and Paola Rivera-Ventura on computers in Ms. Kue-Smith's first/second grade class.
5. Myona Stiney, first grade, doing Everyday Math.

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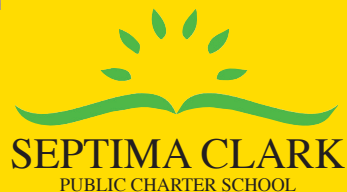
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Shauntia Mabry, third grade, learning of portraiture

The DC CAS is a standardized test for compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act and serves as a litmus test for judging math and reading skills starting in third grade, adding writing in fourth grade and science in fifth. Plummer was a low-performing school, but in 2007, the second year of DC CAS, their reading improved by 2 percent and math by 7 percent. In 2008, Plummer found their groove, making a jump of 17 percent in reading and 15 percent in math.

Gray attributes attention to data as a contributing factor in Plummer’s success. Color-coded charts decorate the classrooms, so students can see how they are doing in math and reading – blue meaning “advanced,” green meaning “proficient,” yellow being “basic” and red as “below basic.” This gives students confidence by seeing where they are doing well and where they need improving. “I would see students in the hall and ask them what color they were,” Gray said. “It gets students excited to strive to be green or blue. Even kids who are red, they’re going to make it to yellow next time. I have a data room where I hold staff meetings and such. We’ve got all the data posted around the room – DC BAS (Benchmark Assessment System), DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), Head Start Work Samplings, reading levels for the whole school.”

Head Start

Head Start is an early childhood enrichment program, incorporating social services with learning and wellness. The students eat with staff “family-style” to learn table manners. Parents or guardians are required to attend a monthly meeting and must sign children in and out each day.

Bonus Points

Andrill Harris serves as the bridge connecting school and community. Harris works with the PTA as well as Parent Coordinator Jewell Fordham to set up events such as Career Day and Safety Day. Career Day (May 27) featured 28 registered community members who spoke

to Plummer students on the relevance of what they are learning in school and what they may do as adults in the job market.

Safety Day, through their partnership with the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement (NOBLE) Executives, was a chance for students to experience a simulated 911 call and learn how to articulate their emergency. Firefighters explained the points of the fire engine and dressed a teacher in their gear. Officer Mackie, the resource officer assigned to Plummer, taught students about stranger safety.

Meeting the World Outside

In April, the entire third grade was given tickets to the White House Easter Egg Roll. “Due to their [DC CAS] test scores from last year, due to their hard work, they were given tickets from the secretary of education, the mayor and the chancellor,” said Harris.

Hattie Jones’ fifth grade learned about the diverse South American country of Guyana before visiting the embassy to report their findings. “They experienced the culture, the food. They did an excellent job on presenting to the embassy,” said Harris.

The fourth and fifth grades participated in the Young Playwrights Theater, a 12-week course in which students express their feelings in the form of a play. Antoine Taylor’s play “Tornado Boy” was selected for performance at the Warner Theater in April.

After School

Jessica Halford coordinates aftercare, which runs daily from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m. for students in kindergarten to fifth grade. They offer a snack, and students may practice basketball and track, practice cheerleading and participate in girl scouts, tutoring and DCPS’ Power Hour (an after-school academic enrichment program). The math resources teacher works with students, using DC BAS scores as a guide. Said Halford, “Students explore arts enrichment every day. On Friday we

do a CR block – drawing coincides with this.” “CR” means “creative response” – a written response to a question, a critical skill for self-expression and channeling emotion.

Parent Resources

“In addition to making significant academic gains, Principal Gray firmly understands the importance of partnering with parents in order to build a strong school community,” said DCPS Chancellor Michelle Rhee. “Dedicated parent volunteers, a full-time parent coordinator and a parent academy are just some of the supports and resources families can expect at Plummer Elementary.”

To better serve the students, Plummer is bringing parents into the fold with parent academies. “The main goal is getting more parental involvement,” said Gray. “We present a series of workshops, and they pick three.” The winter academy included a workshop on communicating with teachers, and a lesson on making math and reading fun. The spring academy included fun reading activities for parents and children and parent preparation for the DC CAS.

Ms. Cherry, an involved grandparent, is taking it all in. “We’ve got to get the parents to come to these – tell everyone to come on out,” she said.

There will be more academies offered next year, like math night, and some will be specific to parents – résumé writing and job search skills. The staff social worker is also available to help parents fill out paperwork and make referrals for social services. Said Gray, “We’re helping parents get the support they need to help their children.”

Campus Life

Plummer is on a corner lot with two playgrounds, a cafeteria and a gymnasium/auditorium. The library has \$10,000 in new books, courtesy of Toyota; DCPS took care of the carpet and paint, and the Jewish Federation and the DC Jewish Community Center provided financial support, shelves and sweat equity to put it together. Plummer, built around 1960, is in good repair, according to Gray. They’re in line for a DCPS “facilities blitz” in 2014.

To learn more about Plummer Elementary School, visit them at 4601 Texas Ave. SE, or call 202-969-4360. ★

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